



8. Courtship and Marriage

In pioneer days it appears that a woman's least attempt to make herself attractive by artificial means was regarded with suspicion. There are places in the Ozarks even now where a married woman who uses "face whitenin'" is looked down upon by her respectable neighbors. In the remotest settlements nowadays, however, young girls manage to get "store-boughten" cosmetics—cheap powder, lipstick, and perfume. A few years ago the mothers of these girls used flour or corn-starch for face-whitenin', and I have seen a woman take an artificial rose off an old hat, dampen it with her tongue, and rub the dye on her cheeks by way of rouge. The old-timers tell of a weed called cow slobber, too, with a red sap which gave color to many a hill-country belle's cheek.

There are many odd folk beliefs connected with backwoods beauty treatments. Dew, or dew and buttermilk, or various mixtures of honey and buttermilk are recognized remedies for roughened skin and pimples on the face and neck. Rain water caught on the first day of June is supposed to clear up muddy complexions and eliminate freckles. The fresh blood of a chicken—that of a black pullet in particular—is also said to remove freckles and make the skin white and creamy. Fresh tomato juice is a very fine bleach for darkened skins, although some girls prefer to rub their arms and faces with cucumber pulp just before going to bed. Mrs. Addah Matthews, of Monett, Missouri, says that Ozark girls used to apply sassafras tea to their faces, in the belief that it would benefit their complexions.

A few years ago, girls came to believe that a poultice of

fresh cow dung removes freckles, makes the skin soft and fresh, and greatly improves the feminine complexion. A pretty woman in Crane, Missouri, told me that she and her chum made thick masks of cow dung and wore them for hours at a time. "It drew up my face," she said, "till I couldn't hardly move a eye-winker!"

The dirty water from a blacksmith's tub, in which hot horse-shoes have been tempered, is famous as a lotion for a spotted or muddy complexion. Many girls try to remove freckles by rubbing the face with a boy baby's diaper, wet with fresh urine. Some of the most popular treatments are kept secret. Once I made some complimentary remark to a girl about her complexion, and she started to sing the praises of a new cosmetic she had brewed out of beet tops, when suddenly she stopped short with the remark that if she *told* anybody the spell would be broken and the charm wouldn't work.

It is proverbial that the winds of March are bad for the complexion:

March winds and May sun
Make clothes white and maids dun.

Many mountain women say that to eat chicken hearts, especially *raw* chicken hearts, will make any girl good looking; I know one poor damsel who ate them for years, but without any benefit so far as I could see. May Stafford Hilburn says that in her section of the Ozarks the girl must swallow the chicken heart not only raw but *whole!*¹ In Cassville, Missouri, a woman told me that to swallow a raw chicken heart at one gulp may not make a girl beautiful, but it will render her sexually attractive, so that "she can git whoever she wants."

The touch of a dead man's hand is popularly supposed to discourage moles, blackheads, enlarged pores, and other facial blemishes. I have seen a little girl, perhaps three years old, dragged into a village undertaking parlor and "tetched," in

¹ *Missouri Magazine* (September, 1933), p. 21.

the belief that a large red birthmark on the child's face might thus be removed.

A girl can cure her chapped or roughened lips by kissing the middle bar of a five-rail fence, but it is well to put a bit of lard or tallow on the lips also, according to my informants.

Most country girls have their ears pierced for earrings, but this should be done when peach trees are in bloom, and when "the sign is right." If the ears are pierced at any other time, the openings are likely to become infected; one girl told me her ears got so sore she "couldn't hardly pull the strings through without hollerin'!"

The Ozark women have several outlandish treatments for falling hair, but the details of these are supposed to be kept secret, as to tell anybody will break the charm. I have been unable to learn anything definite about this business, beyond the fact that one course of treatment takes forty-nine days and requires large amounts of fresh urine, which is carried in bottles and buckets from all over the neighborhood to the house of the woman undergoing the treatment.

In Washington county, Arkansas, there are women who claim to cure baldness, or at least to arrest falling hair, with a salve made from tallow mixed with the scrapings of old harness, preferably that which has been worn by a white mule. Wild-cherry bark makes a fine hair tonic and hair restorer. Sage tea is not only popular as a hair dressing but is also said to restore the natural color of hair which is turning gray. A tea made from peach-tree leaves, with a little sulphur added, is said to be a sure cure for dandruff. Sap from wild grape vines is highly recommended as a hair tonic.

I am told that in pioneer days some women made a curling fluid by steeping flaxseed in hot water, but just how this was supposed to work I do not know. Some say that it was applied to the hair just before the rag curlers were put on. "We didn't have no curlin'-irons in them days," an old woman told me.

The girl who cuts her hair at the time of the new moon will

see it grow rapidly and luxuriantly. Hair cut in the dark of the moon is likely to lose its luster, or even to become gray prematurely. A woman's hair should never be cut in March—this makes it dull and lifeless and sometimes causes headaches which persist until midnight on March 31.

A mountain girl of my acquaintance placed a lock of her hair under a stone in a running stream, believing that the water would make her hair glossy and attractive. Another way to promote the growth of hair is to bury a "twist" of it under the roots of a white walnut tree, in the light of the moon.

To burn combings, or hair which has been cut off, is forbidden to Ozark girls, as it would make their hair brittle. Combings should be buried in the ground. Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Mahnkey, of Mincy, Missouri, tells me that one must never throw combings out of doors—if a bird should use even one hair in building a nest, the original owner of the hair is likely to go insane. Others say that to have your hair in a bird's nest won't necessarily drive you crazy, but it will cause a series of terrible headaches.

Children are often told that eating bread crusts makes the hair curly, and some parents contend that a diet of carrots also causes hair to curl. Most mountain folk feel that curly hair is somehow more attractive than straight, so it may be that these sayings are intended primarily to induce children to eat bread crusts and carrots. One often hears that if a straight-haired girl shaves her head, the new hair will "come in curly," but I have never known anybody to give it a trial.

It is always bad luck to part one's hair with a comb that has touched the head of a corpse; to do so may cause the hair to fall out.

Country women in the Ozarks seldom put water on their hair—they prefer to dry-clean it with cornmeal. But when it is necessary to wet one's hair, it is best not to use a comb until the hair is perfectly dry. To comb wet hair always makes it coarse, according to the granny-women.

Nearly all of the old-timers disliked to comb their hair by artificial light. I have seen a man at least seventy years old hobble out into his back yard and stand in the moonlight while he combed his long white hair, rather than comb it in front of a mirror in the kitchen illuminated by a kerosene lamp.

A young woman should *never* comb her hair at night, under any condition, since to do this is said to "lower a gal's nature"—that is, make her less passionate sexually. That is the meaning of the old sayin':

Comb your hair after dark,
Comb sorry into your old man's heart.

Many hillmen still believe in love powders and potions, and this belief is encouraged by the country druggists, who sell a perfumed mixture of milk sugar and flake whiting at enormous profits. This stuff is dissolved in a girl's coffee or fed to her in candy and is said to be quite efficacious. Many mountain damsels carry love charms consisting of some pinkish, soaplike material, the composition of which I have been unable to discover; the thing is usually enclosed in a carved peach stone or cherry pit and worn on a string round the neck, or attached to an elastic garter. I recall a girl near Lanagan, Missouri, who wore a peach stone love-charm on one garter and a rabbit's foot fastened to the other.

(Surreptitiously touching the back of a man's head is said to be a sure way of arousing his sexual passions,) and every mountain girl knows that if she puts a drop of her menstrual fluid into a man's liquor he is certain to fall madly in love with her. Whiskey in which her fingernail trimmings have been soaked is said to have a very similar effect.) These beliefs are taken so seriously in the Ozarks that the victim of a love-charm or philter is not held morally responsible for his actions, and many a deserted wife is comforted by the reflection that her man did not leave of his own free will but was "cunjured off."

Ozark girls sometimes carry little wasp nests in the belief

that they somehow attract men. These objects are usually pinned to the lady's undergarments—if she wears any undergarments. It is said that if a girl steals the band from a man's hat and makes a garter of it, the original owner will fall in love with her at once. Yellow garters are very popular, as they attract men to the wearer and even render her lovers faithful. For a married woman to wear yellow garters is not so good, however—it indicates that she is interested in men other than her husband.) Many a mountain girl conceals dried turkey bones about the room in which she meets her lover, or even secretes them in her clothing, in the belief that they will render him more amorous. I once heard some village loafers "greening" a young chap because some turkey bones had been found behind the cushions of his Ford, the supposition being that they had been placed there by women who had ridden with him.

Mountain girls sometimes carry the beard of a wild turkey gobbler concealed about their clothing. Rose O'Neill, of Day, Missouri, asked a neighbor about this once and was told that "we use it to clean the comb with." Probably the gobbler's beard does make a satisfactory comb cleaner, but there is no doubt whatever that some backwoods damsels regard it as a love charm.

A plant called yarrow, or milfoil (*Achillea millefolium*), is used in making love potions. The same is said to be true of dodder, also called love vine or angel's hair. Women in north-west Arkansas tell me that the roots of the lady's-slipper or moccasin flower (*Cypripedium*) contain a powerful aphrodisiac. The leaves and stems of mistletoe are made into some kind of "love medicine," but the whole matter is very secret. I have on two occasions seen women boiling big kettles of mistletoe out of doors but was unable to get any details of the procedure.

(If a girl has quarreled with her lover, she may get him back by taking a needle and drawing a little blood from the third finger of her left hand. Using the needle as a pen, she writes her initials and his in blood on an ironwood chip, draws three circles

around the letters, and buries the chip in the ground. The recreant boy friend will be hangin' round again in three days, or less.

The boys in northwestern Arkansas make a love medicine from the web of a wild gander's foot, dried and reduced to powder. Put a pinch of this in a girl's coffee, and she will not only fall in love with you at once but will be faithful to you as long as she lives. This is somehow connected, in the hillman's mind, with the belief that wild geese mate but once.

By cleaning her fingernails on Saturday, and muttering a mysterious old sayin' at the same time, a girl can *force* her lover to visit her on Sunday. When a boy says "my gal fixed her fingernails yesterday," he means that he is going to see her and implies that he does so rather reluctantly.

(If a girl puts salt on the fire for seven consecutive mornings it will bring her absent lover home, whether he wants to come or not.) Or (she may place her shoes together on the floor at right angles, so that the toe of one touches the middle of the other, and recite:

4 wk. When I my true love want to see
I put my shoes in the shape of a T.

This is said to be especially effective when the errant swain is married or has become entangled with a married woman.

I once knew two sisters in Jasper county, Missouri, who went far out in the woods and bent several twigs on a pawpaw tree, tying them fast in the bent position with twisted locks of their own hair. Relatives of these girls told me that this had something to do with an unsatisfactory love affair in which both girls were involved, but I was unable to learn anything definite about the matter. It was not the sort of thing that a mere acquaintance could safely investigate.

In rural Arkansas the backwoods girls tie little pieces of cloth to the branches of certain trees—usually pawpaw or hawthorn, sometimes redbud or ironwood. I have seen five of these little

bundles in a single pawpaw tree. I have untied several and examined them carefully; there was nothing in them that I could see, just little pieces of cloth, doubtless torn from old dresses or petticoats. The natives say they are love charms, but just how they work I do not know. No woodsman that I have ever known would think of touching one of these objects, and I have often been warned that it is very bad luck to "monkey with such as that."

In some localities it is said that a man hides the dried tongue of a turtle dove in a girl's cabin—this makes her fall madly in love with him, and she can't deny him anything. I was told of a case in which a girl's superstitious parents searched the cabin for days, trying to find the tongue which they believed must be hidden there. The neighbors laughed about this, and the girl herself said that turtle doves' tongues had nothing to do with the case, but the parents still believed the old story. They never did find the dove's tongue, however.

A girl can take a needle which has been stuck into a dead body, cover it with dirt in which a corpse has been laid, and wrap the whole thing in a cloth cut from a winding sheet; this is supposed to be a very powerful love charm, and a woman who owns such a thing can make any man fall in love with her. A needle which has been used to make a shroud is useful, too. If a girl thrusts such a needle into her lover's footprint in her own dooryard, he is forced to remain with her whether he wants to or not. If he leaves the neighborhood he will get sick, and if he stays away long enough he will die.

Girls in love are supposed to have an inordinate appetite for cucumber pickles. In the eighties boys used to leave little boxes of fruit and candies at their sweethearts' doorsteps on the eve of February 14. For a boy to include a pickle was considered very daring, and the old folks said that a girl who ate one of these Valentine pickles was henceforth unable to resist the boy who gave it to her. Some old-timers, however, insist that pickles were traditionally regarded as a *cure* for love sickness rather

than a love charm or an aphrodisiac. According to this interpretation, the pickle in a Valentine box was no more than a humorous reference to a rival, or to some previous love affair.

Negroes in Arkansas make and sell charms to keep husbands constant, to bring back wandering lovers, to help in seducing girls, and so on. They are little cloth bags containing feathers, hair, blood, graveyard dirt, salt, and sometimes human bones. Some low-class white people buy these and carry them. They are called *charms*, *conjures*, *hands*, *jacks* or *jujus*. Many white people laugh at this "nigger business," but I have known educated white men who were careful to avoid touching these charms. It was a dealer in jujus, in Little Rock, Arkansas, who told me that a man infatuated with an unworthy woman could cure himself by smearing the fresh blood of a male deer over his genitals.

A hillman whose wife is "triffin' on him" is sometimes persuaded that he can make everything right by going into the woods at midnight and boring a hole in the crotch of a pawpaw tree. This done, he mutters a secret Biblical quotation, drives a stout wooden peg into the auger hole, and walks away without looking back at the tree. The hole behind the peg may contain a wad of human hair, dried blood, fingernail parings, a piece of a woman's undergarment, and some unidentified material resembling beeswax. This method of curbing marital infidelity is known as the "pawpaw conjure" and is said to be of Negro origin.

It is generally believed that a man who seduces little girls is likely to have a curse laid upon his family, and his own children are particularly liable to the same outrage that he has perpetrated upon the daughters of others.

Marriage is still regarded as a serious matter in the Ozarks, and there are many singular superstitions connected with the choice of a mate. The typical hillman is determined to marry a virgin at any cost, and is firmly convinced that he can detect virginity at a glance. The theory is that every female child

has a tiny cleft or depression in the end of her nose, and that this depression immediately disappears after sexual intercourse is effected.

There are several strange old notions about the use of mirrors in testing female virtue. One of these is reflected in a song still popular in the backwoods:

Mamma, mamma, have you heard?
Papa's goin' to buy me a mockin'-bird!

If the mockin'-bird won't sing
Papa's goin' to buy me a golden ring.

If the golden ring is brass
Papa's goin' to buy me a lookin'-glass.

If the lookin'-glass don't shine
Papa's goin' to shoot that beau of mine!

A young woman near Mena, Arkansas, who repeated these verses, explained the final stanza by saying that the lookin'-glass "shines" only for virgins and virtuous wives.

Many hill women are firmly convinced that a man's penis is exactly three times as long as his nose, and a girl who "keeps company" with a very long-nosed man is subjected to the good-natured raillery of her friends. There is an old saying to the effect that a girl with a small mouth has a small, tight vagina. Teeth set wide apart indicate a passionate, sensual nature. Cold hands are believed to be associated with a warm heart and are often regarded as a sure sign that one is in love. A woman with very small ears is likely to be miserly and petulant. If a girl's second toe is longer than the big one, she will try to bully her lover. When a woman has the habit of resting her thumb inside her clenched hand, everybody knows that she will be ruled absolutely by her husband, while if her thumb is habitually extruded the man who marries her will probably be henpecked.

To tell if a person is jealous, hold a buttercup under his chin;

if the yellow color of the flower is reflected, so that the skin looks yellow, he's jealous. There is some trick of detecting jealousy by holding a red-hot poker near the face; a little boy lost one of his eyes because of this foolishness at the Cherry Grove schoolhouse near Lamar, Missouri, in 1938.

To speak of a person as white-livered, in some parts of America, is to call him a coward. In the Ozarks, however, white-livered generally means oversexed. When a lively, buxom, good-looking woman loses several husbands by death, it is often said that her inordinate sexual passion has killed 'em off, and she is referred to as a white-livered widder. Usually it is only a figure of speech, but there are people who actually believe that a "high nature" is correlated with white spots on the liver, and that this condition has often been revealed by postmortem examination.

There are many ways of determining whether or not one's sweetheart is faithful. If the fire which a man kindles burns brightly, he knows that his sweetheart is true to him, but if it smolders, she is likely to prove unfaithful. As a further test, he may go into a clearing and bend down a mullein stalk so that it points toward her cabin; if she loves him the stalk grows up again, but if she loves another it will die. Mrs. Addah Matthews, Monett, Missouri, says that "a girl used to name a mullein stalk, then bend the stalk toward her fellow's house; if it grew bent in that direction he loved her." Sometimes the girl puts a bit of dodder or love vine on a growing weed; if it flourishes, her lover is faithful, and if it withers he is not to be trusted. Or she may pluck a hair from her head and draw it between her fingers—if it curls he loves her, if it remains straight he does not. Another girl picks a cocklebur, names it for her lover, and throws it against her skirt; if it sticks, she knows that her lover is true to her, if it doesn't stick she thinks he is false.

A hill girl often names a match for a boy whom she admires and then lights the match; if it burns to the end without break-

ing, she is assured that the boy loves her. My neighbor's daughters once used up half a box of matches in this search for knowledge, an extravagance which was harshly rebuked by the frugal parents. Another common trick is for a girl to light a match and hold it straight up; if the blackened head turns toward her boy friend or her boy friend's home, it is a sign that he loves her. But if the match points in some other direction, she has reason to doubt his fidelity.

If a ring suddenly breaks upon a person's finger, without any obvious reason for its breaking, it means that his or her loved one is unfaithful; some say that it means the absent one has committed an act of infidelity at the exact moment when the ring cracks.

To find out if her sweetheart loves her, a girl hangs a Bible up with a string and repeats aloud: "Whither thou goest, I will go. Where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, thy God my God." Then she shouts the name of her boy friend—Jim or Bill or Alec or whatever it is. If the Bible turns on the string so that the edge points toward the speaker, it is a sign that the boy loves her. Some say it means that they will marry.

There are many ways in which a mountain girl may learn the identity and characteristics of her future husband. She may put a live snail in a glass fruit jar over night; the initials of the man she is to marry will be outlined in the snail's slimy track. An old woman once told me that if a girl counts nine stars each night for nine consecutive nights, on the ninth night she will inevitably dream of her husband-to-be. A simpler method is to stare very hard at the brightest star in sight and wink three times; this produces the dream on the first night and gets the same result with much less expenditure of time and energy. Some girls divine their future marital adventures by what is called cancellation; they write down their own names with those of their boy friends, and cancel out identical letters, shouting

“false, true, false, true” the while. This cancellation business is a bit more complicated than appears at first sight, and I have never been able to understand exactly how it works.

Down south of Hot Springs, Arkansas, they tell me that a girl goes out in the woods after a rain and “repeats a verse”—meaning a passage from the Bible. Then she reaches behind her without looking and lifts up a flat stone. Under the stone she’ll find a hair, and it will be the same color as that of the man she is destined to marry.

A woman at Zinc, Arkansas, says that when a girl hears a dove and sees the new moon at the same instant, she repeats this verse:

Bright moon, clear moon,
Bright and fair,
Lift up your right foot
There’ll be a hair.

Then she takes off her right shoe and finds in it a hair like that of her future husband.

Mrs. Effa M. Wilson, Verona, Missouri, has a slightly different version. She says that when you hear the first dove coo in the spring, sit down wherever you are and take off your right stocking. In the heel of the stocking you’ll find the hair, and it will be exactly the color of your future husband’s hair. A lady in Marshfield, Missouri, tried this, and to her amazement she did find a hair in her stocking. It was a blond hair, though, and she married a black-haired man.

Sometimes a mountain damsel boils an egg very hard, then removes the yolk and fills the cavity with salt. Just before bedtime she eats this salted egg. In the night, according to the old story, she will dream that somebody fetches her a gourd filled with water. The man who brings her the water is destined to be her husband. It is surprising how many young women have tried this, and how many feel that there may be something in it.

A girl near Clinton, Arkansas, tells me that she has only to write the names of nine boys on a slip of paper and put the

paper between her breasts at bedtime; she is sure to dream of the one who will be her husband.

The girl who looks at the new moon over her right shoulder and repeats:

New moon, new moon, do tell me
Who my own true lover will be,
The color of his hair, the clothes that he will wear
And the happy day he will wed me,

will dream of her future mate that night.

They tell me that sometimes a girl writes the names of six boys on six slips of paper and puts them under her pillow. When she awakes in the night, she pulls out one at random and throws it on the floor. She does not look at it until daylight, when it will be found to bear the name of her future husband. The girl who lights a lamp to look at the slip before morning will have very bad luck and perhaps get no husband at all.

If a girl finds a pod containing nine peas, she hangs it up over the door. The first eligible man to walk under the pod will be her future husband.

The first time a country girl sleeps in a strange room, she names the four corners for four boys of her acquaintance. The first corner that she looks into when she awakes bears the name of the boy she will marry.

In some sections, when a backwoods girl sees the new moon, she *names* a boy—pronounces his name aloud. Then she watches for the boy, day after day. If he happens to have his face toward her, the first time she sees him, she thinks that they will someday be sweethearts. If his back is toward her, she feels that there is nothing to do but forget him.

The first day of May is important to girls who are looking for information about their future mates. If a girl gets up early on the morning of May 1, goes to the spring, and breaks a guinea's egg into a cup, she'll see the face or the initials of her husband-to-be in the water. A girl who looks obliquely into a mirror when she first wakes up on May Day will see the re-

flection, or at least initials or letters forming the name, of the man who is to be her mate.

A maiden lady who wants to see her future husband goes to a well at noon on May 1 and holds a mirror so as to reflect the light down into the darkness. Some girls say that they have actually seen their mates-to-be in the water. Others are afraid to try this stunt, because sometimes a girl doesn't see any man, but an image of herself in a coffin, which means that she'll die before another May Day. If a girl sees nothing at all in the water, she is very likely to be an old maid.

A woman in Christian county, Missouri, used to do the same trick with a gold ring in a glass of water. She set the glass in front of a mirror and gazed fixedly at the reflection of the ring. I was told of another maiden who looked into this ring-mirror gadget and saw a new-made grave by the river; everybody thought it meant that the poor girl would die soon, but she lived to be nearly seventy.

On the last night of April, a girl may wet a handkerchief and hang it out in a cornfield. Next morning the May sun dries it, and the wrinkles are supposed to show the initial of the man she is to marry. Or she may hold a bottle of water up to the light on the morning of May 1, just at sunrise, and see a picture or outline of the boy who is to be her husband.

Sometimes a widow gets up before dawn on May Day and hangs a horseshoe over her door. The first creature to enter will have a complexion and hair color like that of her future mate. There is a whole cycle of funny stories based on this belief, tales of possums, rats, snakes, or even skunks wandering in, and so on.

Some girls hunt birds' nests on May 1. If the first nest a girl finds on that day has eggs in it, she'll be married soon; if the nest is empty, she will be an old maid. "But what if there are young birds in the nest?" I asked the girl who told me about this. She cast down her eyes, blushed, and made no answer. Her mother overheard the question, and called the girl into the

house at once. I have never been able to learn what happens to the girl who finds young birds in the nest.

Here is another way of looking into a mountain maiden's future: take three bowls, one containing clean water, one full of dirty water, one empty. Blindfold the girl, lead her into the room, and ask her to select one of the bowls. If she picks the clean water, she'll be happily married; if she picks the dirty water, she will soon be a widow; if she picks the empty bowl, she'll be an old maid.

One may always ascertain the future bridegroom's occupation by counting the buttons on a girl's new dress—rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief, doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief—but this does not seem to be taken seriously except by very small girls. If a little girl is always getting her apron wet, when she washes the dishes, it is a sign that she'll marry a drunkard. The woman who finds a broken feather or a crooked twig in her hair will marry a most unsatisfactory man—some say that her husband will be a cripple.

If a girl wets her nightdress, hangs it before the fireplace to dry, and goes to bed stark naked in a room by herself, she is sure to see her future mate before morning. The story is that his image appears as soon as the nightdress is dry enough to be turned; he walks into the room, turns the nightdress around, and walks out again. There are many stories about this "conjure," some of them a bit ribald.

Or a girl may urinate on the sleeve of a man's shirt and hang it up between her bed and the fireplace. In this case her future husband is forced to appear in the night and move the shirt so that it will not burn. "He aint really there, of course," one woman told me. "She just *dreams* it."

Some hillfolk say that a girl can call up a phantom of the man she is to marry by wrapping a lock of hair with some of her fingernail clippings in a green leaf and thrusting them into the ashes in the fireplace. Then she sits down before the fire. When the hair and fingernails begin to get warm, the ghostly

appearance of her future husband is supposed to rescue them from the fire. Sometimes several girls try this at once. The door must be left open, and everyone must maintain absolute silence.

In some sections of Arkansas, the girls "set a dumb supper," by making a pone of cornmeal and salt, in complete silence. Each girl must take her turn at stirring the meal, each must shift the pone as it bakes; each must place a piece of the bread on her own plate, and another on the plate next hers at the table. When this is done, the girls open the doors and windows, then sit down silently and bow their heads. All during the baking, the wind has grown stronger, and by this time there should be a regular gale blowing through the house. Often the lights are blown out. The phantom husbands are supposed to enter in silence. Each girl is supposed to recognize the man who sits down beside her. If she sees nobody, it means she will never marry. If she sees a black figure, without recognizable features, it means that she will die within a year. Many people still take this business seriously enough to forbid their daughters to trifle with it. Some parents say it aint Christian and smells of witchcraft, while others object to such foolishness because it sometimes frightens nervous girls into hysteria.

An old woman in Washington county, Arkansas, told me that when she was a girl they always walked backward while cooking and serving a dumb supper, and measured everything by thimblefuls instead of by spoonfuls or cupfuls. According to this version of the tale, nobody expects to see an apparition enter the room, no extra plates are set for ghostly visitors, and there is no supernatural wind to blow out the lights. Each girl sits down in silence and eats her tiny portion of food, then bows her head over the empty plate. If all goes well, she sees the outline of her future husband's face *in the plate*, comparable to the figures seen by crystal gazers and the like.

Otto Ernest Rayburn, of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, says that in his neighborhood early May was the only proper season

for a dumb supper; Rayburn's informants seemed to regard the ritual as more or less of a joke, but the old-timers that I have interviewed were very serious about it, even a little frightened. May Stafford Hilburn, apparently referring to the region about Jefferson City, Missouri, mentions the dumb supper as an old-fashioned custom "to hasten the culmination of a budding romance through the mystic rites thus performed."² I am not certain just what this means, but Mrs. Hilburn's description calls for midnight, absolute silence, walking backward and so on, just like the dumb-supper ritual in other sections.

In Cedar county, Missouri, the same sort of function was called a "dummy" supper. Working in absolute silence, walking backward and looking over her left shoulder, each girl placed a chair at the table and set out dishes, knives, and forks as if for a meal, except that the dishes were empty. This done, the girls took their places behind the chairs and stood with bowed heads. The idea was that after a short period of silent concentration the wraith or spirit of each girl's husband-to-be would appear for a moment in the chair she had prepared for him. One spoken word, a laugh, a smile, or even a frivolous thought on this solemn occasion was supposed to break the charm. There have been cases in which overwrought damsels persuaded themselves that they really saw ghostly figures seated at the "dummy table." One old woman assured me that the phantom husband was visible to all of the girls about the table, but the general opinion is that he appeared only to the damsel who stood directly behind his chair, and who was destined to become his wife.

Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, of Mincy, Missouri, tells a good story about the dumb-supper ceremony. She says that it is not fiction, but a tale that was told and believed in Taney county, Missouri, when she was a girl. Here is the story in Mrs. Mahnkey's own words, as published in the *White River Leader*, Branson, Missouri, Jan. 4, 1934:

² *Missouri Magazine* (October, 1933), p. 14.

A dear friend of mother's, a plump and jolly woman, comforting and reposeful, not one capable of harboring such strange and weird beliefs, told the story of the dumb supper, so vividly, so impressively, that I never forgot. She and mother were quilting and as the story progressed, and she would bend her face to bite off her thread, she got in the way of giving a cautious glance over her shoulder, and before the tale had ended, I, too, was giving rather awed glances out into the long, darksome hall.

She was talking as if she had been present, or as if she had intimately known the parties engaged in this supernatural feast. It seemed the family were away for the night, and the grown girls, left in charge of the home, had invited in some neighbor girls to keep them company, so a dumb supper was proposed. This meant, that in utter silence, and every step taken, to be made backwards, the table was to be laid for a guest, who would come in at midnight, and who was to be the future husband of the girl at whose plate he sat down. The table was only set for one, as it seemed at the test, only one girl was brave enough to thus put her fortune to the trial.

The others watched her in fascinated silence, as she stepped quickly, if awkwardly, about her task, in the big low ceilinged kitchen. She placed a peculiar knife at the side of the mysterious guest's plate, with a roguish smile at her friends. A sharpbladed knife, set into a piece of deer horn, for one handle.

In utter silence they waited, until the old clock slowly droned out the 12 strokes of midnight, when to their terror, the door was dashed open, a tall form advanced, with swift noiseless steps, and then—an icy wind blew out the light, and one of the horrified girls screamed. But one braver than the rest, closed the door and lighted the lamp. No spectral visitor, they were alone, but the maiden who had set the table, pointed with white face and shaking hands, the peculiar old knife was not there.

Later, this girl did marry a stranger, who had come, as a visiting cousin, to the home of a nearby neighbor. And they seemed to be very happy, although the man was very quiet, even taciturn.

One day the girl's mother, going across the ridge to visit her, found the little cabin strangely cold and forbidding, and hurried in, to find her daughter lying as if dead, with a knife thrust into her breast.

When at last help had been summoned, and the old backwoods doctor, able surgeon was he, too, brought her back to consciousness, shudderingly she told the story.

In a moment of girlish confidence she had told the story of the

dumb supper, and the strange guest, "as tall as you," she had said, and he had listened, in sinister silence. Then he went to an old leather valise he always kept locked, unlocked it, took something in his hand and said to her coldly, "And you are the one. You are that witch. That night I walked through hell," and thrust the knife into her breast, and ran from the house. He was never seen again, and the knife was the same old peculiar knife with the deer horn handle and the keen blade, that the thoughtless girl had laid when so careless and gay, she had set the dumb supper.

When a man has asked a girl to marry him, and she cannot decide whether to have the fellow or not, the old women sometimes advise her to "leave it to the cat." In this procedure she takes three hairs from a cat's tail, wraps them in white paper, and puts the package under her doorstep. Next morning she unfolds the paper very carefully, so as not to shake up the three hairs. If they have arranged themselves in the approximate form of the letter *Y*, the answer is *yes*; if they fall into the shape of an *N*, she will do well not to marry the young man.

There are some things—such as kissing over a gate—that lovers must never do, under any condition, though it is not clear just what would happen to them if they disobeyed this injunction. Neither must a man kiss a girl while he is standing and she is sitting in a chair, since to do so would cause a violent quarrel or "fraction" at once, and perhaps some more serious calamity.

The girl who kisses a man, or even winks at a man, while she is menstruating will ultimately be "ruined" and probably have an illegitimate child. The same fate will come to a menstruating girl who sits in a chair that has just been vacated by a boy. Many mountain girls who do not really believe these things are still careful about this chair business. "There's nothing to those old sayin's, of course," one young woman told me, "but everybody *knows* about 'em, so it don't look modest for a girl in that shape to go round settin' in boys' chairs. And some of these old grannies always notice it. They've got an eagle eye for things like that."

It is said that if a family keeps black cats about, all the daughters will be old maids. Young girls are told that if they trim their fingernails on Sunday they will be slow in finding husbands. A girl who rides a mule will never get a man. If a woman sits on a table, or lets anyone sweep under her chair or across her feet with a broom, she will not get married for a long time. A girl who inadvertently steps over a broom will either not marry at all, or she will be unhappy in her married life. If a country girl accidentally upsets a chair, she will remain single for at least a year; when a young girl knocks over a chair in the presence of persons not friendly to her, she abandons all decorum and leaps wildly to set it up again, because any malicious individual may begin to count inaudibly as the chair falls, and the number of counts made before the chair is picked up represents the number of years which must elapse before the poor girl's marriage.

There is an old saying that a girl who takes the last biscuit from the plate at the table will be an old maid, and there are some people in Missouri and Arkansas who take this very seriously. If a *man* happens to take the last biscuit it is said that he will soon kiss the cook—but this latter notion is only a joke, a cause for polite laughter.

If a boy meets a girl with whom he has been intimate and doesn't recognize her because she is dressed up, it means that one or both of them will marry very soon. If a dog who knows you well suddenly acts as if you were a stranger, it is a sign that you will soon be married. If the first corn silk you see in the summer is red, you will attend more weddings than funerals that year.

When one sees two snakes in a house at once, it means that there will be a wedding there before long. If two crows persistently circle over a cabin, it is a sign that a daughter of the house is about to marry. A girl who accidentally steps on a cat's tail will be married before the year is out. If a girl's skirt is always catching on briars, it is said that she will soon catch a husband.

When three candles or lamps are accidentally placed in a row, it means that there will soon be a marriage in the family. If four people happen to "shake hands crossways" a wedding is also to be expected. A butterfly in the house, or a bee in a woman's shoe, or the accidental dropping of three pans at once are also wedding signs. When a woman inadvertently puts two knives or two forks together at one plate, she knows that someone who sits at the table that day will be married before the year is out. If the coffee grounds in the bottom of a cup form a ring, it means that somebody in the family will be married soon.

Some backwoods girls cross their fingers and then listen for the whippoorwill, every repetition of the bird's cry representing a year which must pass before the listener can get a husband. When an Ozark girl finds a jointsnake she hits it with a stick and carefully counts the pieces; as many segments as the snake breaks into, so many years will elapse before her wedding. If she hears a mockingbird sing after dark she often hastens to put a man's hat on her head, since this means that she will soon be happily married.

I knew a young schoolmarm in Missouri who scorned most of the backwoods superstitions, but who always kissed her thumb when she stumbled, in obedience to the old rhyme:

Stump your toe,
Kiss your thumb,
You'll see your beau
'Fore bedtime comes.

If a girl inadvertently speaks in rhyme, it is a sign that she will meet her lover that night:

Make a rhyme, make a rhyme,
See your beau before bedtime!

It sometimes happens that a girl has a spot of dirt on her face, without knowing it. Somebody sees the spot and cries: "You got a beauty spot!" Thereupon the girl kisses the back of her hand, certain that she will see her lover in a few hours.

If a redbird flies across a girl's path, she is sure to be kissed

twice before nightfall. (When a boy and girl accidentally bump their heads together, ribald old men say it's a sign that they will sleep together soon—perhaps that very night)

When a girl's apron is unfastened accidentally, or her skirt turns up, or her stocking falls down, or her shoe comes untied, she believes that her lover is thinking of her. The woman who inadvertently addresses one person by another person's name knows that the second individual is thinking of her at the moment the name is pronounced. But when a girl burns the cornbread it means that her sweetheart is angry, and if she finds cobwebs in the cabin she fears that he will never visit her again.

Some folk name two apple seeds for a boy and a girl, and drop them on a hot fire shovel; if the seeds move closer together, the boy and girl will marry, but if the seeds spring apart, the boy and girl will separate. Apple seeds are also used by a girl to see which of her suitors she should accept; she names a seed for each lover, moistens the whole lot and sticks them on her forehead. The seed which adheres longest represents the most ardent and persistent of her admirers, and the one who will make the most satisfactory husband.

Many hillfolk tell fortunes and predict marriages by means of certain quotations from the Bible. For example, the twenty-first and thirty-first chapters of Proverbs have thirty-one verses each. Chapter 21 is man's birthday chapter; chapter 31 is woman's birthday chapter. A boy looks up his proper verse in the man's chapter, according to the date of his birth. A man born on the twenty-third of any month, for example, reads Proverbs 21:23—the content of this verse is supposed to be especially significant to him.

There are few professional fortunetellers in the Ozarks, although many of the backwoods seers are accustomed to take money for their services. They always point out, however, that the "power" is not for sale, but that the client may make them a small gift if he likes. So far as I can see, the methods of these women do not differ greatly from those used in other sections

of the country—cards, tea leaves, crystal gazing, palmistry, and the like. Mrs. Angie Paxton, of Green Forest, Arkansas, perhaps the most famous of the Ozark fortunetellers, generally made use of coffee grounds, in a cup which was “shuck up” by the customer. Mrs. Josie Forbes, of Wayne county, Missouri, whom the newspapers always called “The Witch of Taskee,” used to sit at a table with the client and make four dots with a pencil on a piece of paper. She marked one *N*, one *E*, one *S* and one *W*. “Them’s the four directions,” she said solemnly. Around these four characters she traced random curving lines, until the whole thing looked like a conventionalized Arabic inscription. Then she began to talk, glancing carelessly down at the paper from time to time as if for confirmation. Her “readings” were the usual stuff, except that she rather specialized in the diagnosis of obscure diseases, for which she recommended various herbs and proprietary medicines. Both Angie Paxton and Josie Forbes talked a good deal about love and marriage, whenever the customer was not too old or decrepit.

Groups of unmarried women at quilting bees used to shake up a cat in the newly completed quilt and then stand around in a big circle as the animal was suddenly released. The theory was that the girl toward whom the cat jumped would be the first of the company to catch a husband. At other times the quilters would wrap an engaged girl up in the new quilt and roll her under the bed, but the exact significance of this procedure has never been explained to me.

When a lot of sparks are seen to fly from a chimney late at night, passers-by say it is a sign that “young folks are a-courtin’” in the cabin. If a bachelor sits between a man and wife at the dinner table, it means that he will be married before the year is out. The girl who washes her face in dew, just at sunup on May 1, will marry the man she loves best. When a butterfly alights on a young woman’s head, it is a sign that she may change her old beau for a new one “before snow flies.” I once knew a widow who liked to put a four-leaf clover in her

shoe before going to town; she said it might bring her a rich suitor.

In some localities, when a girl sleeps with her legs crossed it means only that she is dreaming of her sweetheart, but several old-timers in Scott county, Arkansas, and Jasper county, Missouri, tell me it is a sign that she is destined to have many children.

A schoolmarm in Fayetteville, Arkansas, says that a girl who looks into a spring before breakfast on May 1 will see, not only her future husband, but also the children she is to have by him. A young woman may check this latter information by skipping flat stones on the surface of a stream, believing that the largest number of skips represents the largest number of children it is possible for her to bear.

In the hills near Mena, Arkansas, I met a woman who carefully counted the little branches on a brier that stuck to the front of her dress. She said that the number of branches was supposed to equal the number of children she might expect to bear. Perhaps this brier-counting is not taken very seriously, but it is certainly known to many young women in the backwoods sections of Arkansas and Missouri.

The signs and omens connected with the marriage ceremony are numerous and conflicting, but there is a general feeling that long engagements and postponed weddings do not augur any good. The old sayin' "happy the woin' not long a-doin'" expresses the Ozarker's attitude.

The best dates and seasons for weddings are determined in part by the changes of the moon and the signs of the zodiac, but the interpretation of this material varies widely. Many old-timers believe that marriages consummated at the full moon, or when the moon is waxing and near the full, are the happiest and most prosperous. In this connection, mountain boys declare that "tomcattin'" is always best in the moonlight, especially when the moon is full, contending that at this time a man does

not acquire any venereal disease and is refreshed rather than exhausted by his efforts.

The Clinton (Missouri) *Eye*, in reviewing old-time Missouri superstitions, says cryptically that "it is bad luck to marry in the wrong sign of the moon."³ Many hillfolk believe that June weddings, consummated when the moon is full, are best of all. However, marriages in January are highly regarded in some quarters, according to the old rhyme:

Marry when the year is new,
Your mate will be constant, kind and true.

Weddings in May are said to be unlucky, and so are those celebrated in rainy or snowy weather; bright, warm wedding days are best, and there is an old saying "happy is the bride that the sun shines on." To marry while the wild hawthorn or red-haw is in bloom would be very bad luck indeed. There are some people, however, who say that young folk should marry when the sign's in the loins—in Scorpio, that is—and that nothing else matters.

The wedding day is called the bride's day; if it is bright and pleasant her wedded life will be happy. If the morning is fair and the afternoon rainy, the first part of her married life will be happy, and the latter half unhappy. The day after the wedding, when the "infare" dinner is held at the home of the bridegroom's parents, is known as the man's day, and the same weather signs indicate his future happiness or unhappiness. To postpone a wedding is very bad luck, however, an almost certain sign that one of the contracting parties will die within a year, so that when a certain date is once decided upon the ceremony must be performed, no matter what the weather conditions may be.

It is best to purchase a wedding ring from a mail-order house, because the ordinary "store-boughten" ring may have absorbed

³ Sept. 7, 1936, p. 5.

bad luck from someone who has tried it on in the store. Once on the bride's finger, the ring should not be removed for seven years.

A couple being married should stand with their feet parallel to the cracks in the floor, as to stand crosswise invites bad luck and evil spirits; this is taken quite seriously in some places. A bride is sometimes audibly reminded to thrust out her right foot as she turns away from the preacher after the ceremony, since it is bad luck to begin one's married life on the left foot. A pinch of mustard seed may be thrown after a newly married couple, by the bride's parents; this is never commented upon, and I have been unable to learn its significance. If newly married people see a toad in the path, immediately after the ceremony, they regard it as a good omen.

Another old-time notion is that the newlywed who falls asleep first after the wedding will be the first of the couple to die; this is widely credited in some sections, although it is rarely mentioned or discussed. Others think that if the number of letters in the couple's given names—both names added together—is divisible by two, it means that the bridegroom will live longer than the bride; if the number is odd, the bride will outlive her husband.

Some mountain girls believe that it is bad luck to marry a man whose surname has the same initial as one's own:

Change the name an' not the letter,
Marry for worse an' not for better.

It is a very bad omen for a bride to help cook her own wedding dinner, and some say it means that she will die soon after the ceremony. Many Ozark mothers will not even allow their daughters to go into the kitchen for several days before they are to be married.

It is quite all right, however, for a bride to make her own wedding garments, and considerable thought is given to the old adage that a bride should wear "something old and something new, something gold and something blue."

Mountain girls sometimes conceal a lock of their own hair in the hem of another girl's wedding dress, or thread a fine needle with a single hair which is then sewn into some inconspicuous part of the bride's outfit. Exactly what sort of "conjure" this is I can't say, but it is akin to witchcraft, and somehow benefits the owner of the hair at the poor bride's expense. I know of one girl who borrowed a reading lens and examined her wedding garments very carefully, to make sure that the women who helped make the dress had not surreptitiously sewn some of their hair into it.

The color of a bride's dress is important, of course, and every hill girl knows the little rhyme:

If when you marry your dress is red,
You'll wish to God that you was dead;
If when you marry your dress is white,
Ever'thing will be all right.

There are similar verses about the other colors, but they seem to be taken less seriously somehow:

Marry in green,
Ashamed to be seen.
Marry in brown,
Move into town.
Marry in blue,
Always be true.
Marry in yeller,
Ashamed of her feller.
Marry in black,
Very bad luck.

Here is another version as I heard it near Harrison, Arkansas:

Blue is true,
Yaller's jealous,
Green's forsaken,
Red is brazen,
White is love
And black is death.

This is the way they say it at Sallisaw, Oklahoma:

Marry in white, you have chosen just right,
 Marry in blue, your man will be true,
 Marry in brown, live out of town,
 Marry in green, ashamed to be seen,
 Marry in red, wish yourself dead,
 Marry in black, better turn back,
 Marry in yellow, got the wrong fellow,
 Marry in gray, you'll be a widow some day.

This brings us to another old-time verse, which deals with the significance of eye color in women:

If a woman's eyes are gray,
 Listen close what she's got to say;
 If a woman's eyes are black,
 Give her room an' plenty o' track;
 If a woman's eyes are brown,
 Never let your own fall down;
 If a woman's eyes are green,
 Whip her with a switch that's keen;
 If a woman's eyes are blue,
 She will always be true to you.

A hill woman is very careful not to exhibit any of her wedding garments until she has worn them, or at least tried them on. I recall a girl who was about to show her mother the new pink "weddin' slippers" which had just arrived by mail, but caught herself just in time, reminded by her sister's agonized outcry. The entire family trembled over this narrow escape from some nameless calamity.

After the bride is completely dressed for the ceremony, she must not look into a mirror until the preacher has pronounced the fateful words—if she does, the marriage will turn out badly. The bride sometimes dresses before her mirror, but is careful to leave off some small item of attire, such as a bow of ribbon, which is put on at the last minute without looking in the glass.

It is bad luck for a backwoods bridegroom to put away his wedding clothes immediately and resume his workaday over-

alls. He is always advised to wear his new suit occasionally for several months, whether he goes to town or not. The bride does not seem to observe any such custom; she may not *sell* the dress she was married in, but she is free to wear it, or pack it away as a sort of keepsake, or give it to a younger sister. Ultimately it finds its place in the patchwork quilts of the clan, where it may be pointed out as Gran'ma so-and-so's wedding dress, long after the bride and groom and all the "weddin'ers" are sleeping in the buryin'-ground on the hill.

There seem to be no particular taboos attached to the newly-weds' cooking utensils, except that it is very bad luck to set up housekeeping with a new coffeepot. I have known hillfolk, even educated ones, to borrow a battered old coffeepot and use it for a month or two, before bringing a brand-new one into the house.

Some religious hillfolk, particularly the adherents of certain so-called Holy Roller cults, consider it proper to refrain from sexual intercourse the first night after marriage; some of them are so ostentatious about the taboo that they do not allow the bride and groom to be alone in a room together. This is supposed to show that the union is somehow spiritual, not based upon mere physical attraction. A fourteen-year-old girl in McDonald county, Missouri, was about to be married, and spoke with something like alarm of what might happen on her wedding night. The girl's aunt said to her, in the presence of my wife and several other women: "Don't you be skeerd, honey. You're a-marryin' a Christian gentleman! He won't do *nothin'* the first night, not even if you was to ask him!"

